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## REPORT

# Digitalization and the Future of Work

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Wollen käme dann stärker zur Sprache. Sie betrifft die Mitte der persönlichen Erfahrung, denn heute gilt: Ich bin das, was ich bin, nicht nur im Spiegel der analogen, sondern mehr und mehr auch im Spiegel der digitalen Welt. Zumindest diese Ebene der Lebenswirklichkeit der *digital natives* gerät aus philosophischer Sicht ins Abseits. Das Spektrum der Virtualität und ihrer Bedeutung erhält wenig Beachtung, denn dass Menschen heute ein analoges und ein digitales Leben führen und welche Aus- und Rückwirkungen dies hat, kommt nur am Rande vor.

Beim letzten Kapitel des Buches fragt man sich, ob sich der Autor nicht doch eine Rückkehr ins analoge Paradies wünscht, wenn er mit einem Lob auf die analoge Welt schließt. Man kommt fast auf den Gedanken, analog sei das neue Bio. Hier hätte man sich eine Argumentation gewünscht, die der gesellschaftlichen Realität der digitalen Generation stärker Rechnung trägt, die in einer analogen und zugleich virtuellen Realität ihr(e) Leben bewältigt.

Ein paar kritische Fragen zum Weiterdenken ergeben sich aus der Lektüre:

- Bleibt uns als Menschen nur noch die Welt der Gefühle als genuin menschlicher Bereich, in dem wir der Technik überlegen sind? Wenn diese Diagnose zuträfe, fände sich hier nicht einer der Ankerpunkte, warum die sogenannten gefühlten Wahrheiten eine derzeit so große Rolle spielen?
- Digitalisierung scheint der ultimative Traum aller Diktaturen zu sein und wird von diesen gerne gezielt eingesetzt. Welche demokratischen Kontrollmechanismen und Eingriffsmöglichkeiten brauchen wir?
- Gibt es so etwas wie ein digitales Unterbewusstsein, das unabhängig von der eigenen Person existiert? Dieses wäre gewonnen aus Nutzungsanalysen und Verbraucherverhalten sowie durch Analyse der im Internet veröffentlichten Interessen der einzelnen NutzerInnen. Hinweise darauf finden sich ja bereits in den Analysedaten der großen digitalen Konzerne, wie etwa jenes berühmt gewordene Beispiel zeigt, wonach sich Schwangerschaftshinweise algorithmisch analysieren lassen, bevor diese der Schwangeren selbst bewusst werden.
- Die Tatsache, dass es kein digitales Vergessen gibt, hat sicherlich längerfristige Auswirkungen auf die Art und Weise, wie wir mit Meinungsäußerungen umgehen, denn die Frage wird sich stellen, was wir uns digital erlauben können.

Alles in allem ein sehr empfehlenswertes Buch für alle, die sich mit dem Thema Digitalisierung auseinandersetzen möchten, leenswert sowohl für NichtwissenschaftlerInnen als auch für die wissenschaftliche Community. Die ansprechende Aufmachung mit Fließtext und eingestreuten Beispielen in Textboxen lockert die Lektüre auf und vertieft an Einzelpunkten die Argumentation.

Digitalization transforms the world economy and thereby also transforms labor relations in their social contexts as a research object for sociological analysis. The Congress of the Swiss Sociological Association on “The Future of Work”, hosted by the Institute of Sociology of the University of Neuchâtel from September 10 to 12, 2019, provided a debate on the future transformations of work by gathering around 400 sociologists and social science researchers from around the globe. Three keynote speeches sketched out the conference topic: David Brady, from the University of California at Riverside, addressed welfare benefits and the employment of single mothers in Europe and the United States; Dominique Méda, from the Université Paris-Dauphine, presented on sense and future of work in Europe; and Heike Solga, from the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), discussed vocational education and training in a digital work world. In what follows, some of the sixteen plenary sessions and 56 workshops with high relevance for technology assessment will get highlighted.

## Scenarios for the future of work: the impact of technological change

Sociologist and philosopher Dominique Méda addressed three scenarios for the future of work: 1) since the 1980s the dismantling of labor laws promoted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has equipped large corporations to compete in the global arena and has led to the worldwide deterioration of working conditions; 2) the current digital technological revolution radically changes labor relations through its potential to stimulate growth and boost economic productivity, but also raises fear of job losses; 3) an “ecological conversion” of work may present an opportunity to recover from present economic damages and help to recuperate employment and to satisfy work expectations. Méda argued that these scenarios are not mutually exclusive, but demonstrate the intertwined future of work with impacts on welfare in relation to

economic competitiveness and the definition of labor in the face of potentially increased technology and a reduced intensity of work.

Chris Tilly from the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs raised the question: does digital technology have the capacity to positively transform society and to bring comfort and freedom to everyday life? According to Tilly, informalization and unregulated work can be explained through three perspectives: a dualist perspective regarding the phenomenon as a vestige of pre-capitalist production dynamics; a survivalist perspective that considers work as the consequence of family survival strategies to face insufficient employment and relate desperate actions of workers; and a structuralist perspective in which work is created under capitalist conditions to keep labor costs low.

environment for gender equality. Digitalization unbalances gender relations in the world of work, disrupts traditional jobs and reflects the work environment outside virtual platforms. The virtual workplace needs regulation with regards to wages, benefits, sufficient work, workers' protection or support for child-care/eldercare.

### Labor in the Global South

Participants in the workshop on "The future of work in world society: the role of labor in the Global South" discussed how work and employment as key principles of world society have been transformed by globalization. The deindustrialization of the West and the consolidation of China (and other Asian countries) as the "factory of the world" have caused a rapid process

## *Digital labor platforms are still at an incipient stage and do not provide an adequate environment for gender equality.*

Neoliberalism has brought structuralist and survivalist informalization processes to world society, thereby weakening labor protection via privatization and subcontracting, but advances in information, transportation and communications technologies offer the potential to promote creativity, freedom, and leisure, as well as to equilibrate inequalities by providing equal participation to all members of society. Global North and South experience informalization and precariousness in different ways: while countries from the Global North show more leapfrogging through technological innovation, countries from the Global South show stronger tendencies towards informality and improvisation in technology adoption. While in Global South countries workers move out of agriculture and into internal migration, in the Global North, countries receive workers from poorer countries, while workers move out of the manufacturing sector. This is accompanied by the fissure of established working conditions and the weakening of the social safety net.

### Re-shaping gender equality in a digitalized era?

Manuela Tomei from the International Labour Organization (ILO) demonstrated the ambivalence of new economic platforms and new business models with regard to gender equality. Results of a survey on web-based labor platforms carried out in 75 countries show that crowd workers are relatively young, the majority being aged from 26 to 35, dominantly male and more than 80% are notably from the Global South. While in countries of the Global North, web-based jobs are performed by the low-skilled workforce, in the Global South these jobs are mostly carried out by highly skilled personnel. Tomei also showed that men prefer to work long hours for paid jobs, whereas women are more likely to work shorter hours combined with care at home (for children or elderly relatives). Overall, digital labor platforms are still at an incipient stage and do not provide an adequate en-

vironment for gender equality. Digitalization unbalances gender relations in the world of work, disrupts traditional jobs and reflects the work environment outside virtual platforms. The virtual workplace needs regulation with regards to wages, benefits, sufficient work, workers' protection or support for child-care/eldercare.

Wanlin Ren from the University of Bern added to the discussion that the rapid integration of China into the world economy through trade and investment after its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 – as well as the increase of Chinese foreign direct investment around the world – have brought some of the worldwide standards derived from Western practices to China, while the country still struggles with specific national and cultural conditions. According to Kumud Bhansali from the South Asian University, communities of first-generation entrepreneurs in India show that entrepreneurial activity is guided by a new cosmopolitanism, ethics and aesthetics emerging from the market mechanisms of neo-liberalism.

### Outlook

The digital era has radically changed labor relations and has transformed society as well. Undoubtedly, multiple benefits have occurred from this phenomenon. Labor flexibility, freedom, mobility, and comfort are some of the positive aspects. However, digitalization has also contributed to increasing income inequality and labor exploitation. Global North and Global South do not seem to point towards a social equilibrium either, and labor rights continue to be violated around the world. The challenge for the future of work is to create a global consensus for regulating digital platforms, thus ensuring the protection of rights that guarantee decent working conditions.